



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARY RICHARDSON MCBEE

*Mary Richardson McBee was born and raised on a small family farm in northern Iowa. Amongst various life journeys during adult years, she spent several decades out west in the Grand Canyon/Colorado River area doing extensive historical research which was published in 2016, along with recent publication of a hiking guide. McBee's past writings have been published in various environmental and philosophical journals as well as The Iowan ([https://isuu.com/the\\_iowan](https://isuu.com/the_iowan)), High Country News (<https://www.hcn.org>), and other periodicals. She has been described as an observer of real and small things.*

## Ode to Liberty #6

BY MARY RICHARDSON MCBEE

I drove slowly up the gravel road in northern Iowa and approached, for the first time in forty years, the one-acre site where our small rural country school had once stood, one that had proudly carried the name Liberty #6. I'd been told nothing was there any longer, but I still felt a deep need to visit the place. The eight-year education I had received there was by far the most important and relevant of my life, much more so than high school, college, and beyond. Now, however, the land was freshly cultivated for miles around. It looked barren, torn, and ravaged everywhere. No more the diverse farmland of my youth. My heart grew heavy.

Upon arriving at the site, indeed, there was nothing. No tree-lined fence. No one-room school building with tolling bell on top. No hand-water pump by the front porch. No outhouse in each back corner of the acre. No swings or basketball hoop or grass-covered yard. So many memories. Now, no sign of anything.

A faint rumble became audible in the distance, then I noticed a tractor slowly approaching, pulling up more cruel curls of land as it came. Soon I could make out the farmer on the tractor. Then he came to a halt and, with obvious difficulty, climbed down from the tractor to fix something on the cultivator behind. It was apparent that arthritis had crippled his joints badly through the years. A sleeve moved loosely in the breeze—a missing arm, probably torn off in a corn sheller or combine during his youth, as so often happened with those working with heavy equipment to farm the land.

Upon finishing, he stood, looked my direction, and waved his good arm. I waved back. He climbed slowly

onto his tractor and continued on until fading slowly into the distance once again, the rumble of the tractor eventually becoming just a murmur.

As a young fifth grader sitting at my smoothly-worn wooden school desk, I would look out the open window at the peaceful scene; my horse tethered to the fence in the shade of a big ash tree, my dog sleeping in the grass nearby. While listening to sixth graders do their lesson repetitions around the table in the front of the room, I could never have dreamed that, half a century later, I would witness the empty and devastating scene that now lay before me.

No longer Liberty. Only a Crippled Man in a Crucified Land. 🌿



THE LIBERTY #6 SCHOOL BUILDING, CIRCA 1955. PHOTO COURTESY OF MARY McBEE